

SELWA'S STORY^{*}

by Clancy Chassay^{}
on Tuesday August 15, 2006**

Last Thursday the Guardian ran a front-page photograph of a dead woman and baby buried in the rubble of Beirut. I have seen many dead people in Lebanon these past weeks, but there was something particularly painful about this picture, amid the endless stream of upsetting images: the baby was very new, very small, and he or she - it was not obvious which - lay dead in the arms of what must surely have been its mother. All that could really be seen of the woman was one battered hand, adorned with a wedding ring, clutching the baby tight. Crouched in the rubble, the two were grey with dust, wrapped up in each other's arms, frozen together in the moment of death.

Who was she, the woman in the rubble? What sort of life - and death - did she have? On Saturday I went out into the wrecked suburbs of the rundown neighbourhood of Shiyyah to try to piece together what I could about her life.

I had visited the site of the blast on the night of August 7 that the woman was killed. A five-storey apartment block had been destroyed by two Israeli missiles, fired from F15 warplanes at around 8pm. Buildings either side had been ripped apart. I arrived on the scene to find a mass of silhouetted bodies scrambling around in the smoky darkness, the tops of their heads lit up by lights from the torn-open living rooms of neighbouring apartments. There were shouts for quiet among the barrage of voices, as

^{*} Originally published by The Guardian UK, Guardian Unlimited (c) Guardian Newspapers Limited 2006

^{**} Clancy Chassay is an English journalist who has lived in Gaza and now lives in Beirut, where he writes for the Guardian UK among other publications.

people struggled to listen for the calls of survivors trapped beneath the rubble.

Returning in daylight, I could see more clearly the extent of the destruction. Amid a mass of tangled wires, dangling shop signs and shattered glass, local residents and family watched as diggers worked to clear the rubble for the rescue workers hunting for bodies. There was the now familiar smell of rotting flesh.

Where to start looking, in such chaos? I had been told that, in all, 12 members of the Wehbe family had died in the blast, and I contacted the security authorities in the area to see if they knew anything about the woman in the photograph. They suggested I try survivors in the Mount Lebanon hospital; on my way there I called on a friend, Hassan, who lived in Shiyyah and whose family name was also Wehbe. He wasn't in his DVD shop, but his father, Abu Hassan, was sitting where he always sits, behind the counter of his modest clothes shop, annexed to his son's. I asked if he had known the Wehbes who were killed in the attack. "Of course," he said. "They were cousins."

Abu Hassan took me to the door and pointed down the narrow empty back street to a house less than 100 metres away. "That is where [the family] are staying now," he said. At that point a young girl walked up. Her name was Khadeeja Wehbe; she was the dead woman's niece, she said. She told me that her aunt's name was Selwa.

Khadeeja took me to her house and, after some delays, introduced me to her family. I was shown into a small courtyard. Chairs were brought out and relatives of Selwa's husband, Ali, came out to greet me. Ali's brother, Abbas, sat with his sister, Hala, and Hala's daughters, Khadeeja, 22, Fatmeh, 21, and Amal, 19. They were warm and hospitable, despite their grief, and the huge anger in this shattered community.

I had seen Abbas before. He was pictured shortly after the blast, walking around

holding up the body of Selwa's baby: this image was what many of the Arab papers carried the next day. ("I wanted to ask them if this was the terrorist they were looking for," Abbas would later tell me.)

These assembled family members told me that Selwa Wehbe was 28 when she was killed. She died alongside her husband, Ali, their 13-day-old daughter, Waad, and their two sons, seven-year-old Hussein, and nine-year-old Hassan. What could not be seen in that photo on the Guardian's front page was that the two boys died clinging to Selwa's body.

Selwa, they said, was born Selwa Nissar, in the southern village of Kfar Sir, just north of the Litani River, near the large town of Nabatieh. She was a softly spoken girl, they said, gentle and kind, with a great sense of humour. Kfar Sir lies along one of the streams that feed the Litani, and Selwa developed a love of swimming; she would spend hours in the river as a young girl. She was a clever girl, her family said, and studied hard at the local school in Kfar Sir, which was a small village with a single policeman. "She loved to joke, she was always fooling around, but she was very clever, very perceptive," said Fatmeh. "She was very down to earth and so kind."

As the family talked, Fatmeh brought out drinks, first ice-cold glasses of sweet powdered orange drink, then the traditional cups of coffee. "Selwa loved the simple things in life, she was a girl of the village," she said. "But educated," added Abbas. "She was a real romantic," Fatmeh went on. "She loved to watch romantic Arab TV series; she was always so moved by their stories."

"She loved her village and the quiet life and it was difficult to leave her village to go to the local town when she married Ali," said Hala.

Ali and Selwa were married, and then set up home in Harouf, where Ali was from. He was a taxi driver and general handy man. "They were perfectly alike; both loved to clown around - they were always joking together," said Hala.

"[Selwa] loved her children so much; she was so happy just being a mother," said Fatmeh.

For the seven years before the conflict began, Selwa and her husband had been building a new home for themselves in Harouf. "A modest house, you understand," said Abbas. "We don't know if it is still standing."

The house was finally ready to move in to only two days before the bombing started; Selwa, meanwhile, was heavily pregnant. The baby was born in the Rhageb Harab hospital in Nabatieh (the nearest big hospital to Harouf) in the second week of the war; Waad, which means "promise", was named after Operation Waad Saadiq, or "truthful promise", the name Hizbullah had given to the operation to capture the two Israeli soldiers; the operation that appears to have triggered this conflict. (Many baby girls born since the war began have been called Waad. Boys have been named Hassan after the Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.)

"My brother always said that everything he had belonged to his wife," said Abbas. "I remember him telling us how they both physically built the house together. He said: 'My wife is the other half of me, she even built half the house; everything we do, we do together.'"

Hala smoked heavily during my visit. She had lost two of her siblings, and six nieces and nephews, in the attack, she told me. Selwa and Ali were very attached to their land, she said, and had waited till the last minute to flee from Harouf to Beirut in Ali's

taxi. "They were the last people in the village to leave," she said, "They felt it was safer to stay at home than risk the roads. In the end the food ran out." So the couple and their children fled to the home in Beirut of one of Ali's brothers, who also died in the blast.

As we had been talking, a young boy had been playing in the alley along the side of the house. He ran up and was introduced: this was Abbas's seven-year-old son, Mohammed. Abbas stroked his head lovingly. The boy said "Hi" politely, and then ran back to his solitary games. He had lost his seven closest friends in the attack, the family said: his first cousins Hassan and Hussein had been like brothers to him. "All his friends have died, he doesn't have anyone left to play with."

The family described the last time they saw Selwa and her family.

"They had come over for coffee," said Hala, "She had just brought new clothes for Waad and wanted to show them to the family." The family took pictures of the baby in her new clothes, and in the courtyard they showed me a picture of baby Waad on a mobile phone. (They did not have pictures of Selwa, they said; all the pictures of her, if not destroyed, were in Harouf, which was too dangerous to travel to.)

"We were measuring the baby," said Fatmeh. "I remember little Waad looked so beautiful, I remember saying we should take her to a professional photographer to get baby photos."

After everyone had admired the baby, Selwa wanted to get back to the house the family were staying in. She was concerned that the boys had left a mess behind them and wanted to get back to tidy up. "I remember she said to Ali, 'We should go back and clean up,'" said Abbas. "I joked with him, I told him, 'Send the wife back.' Ali replied what he

always said: 'Where my wife goes, I go.' He would never let his family go anywhere without him. It was as if God knew this and took all of them together."

Hala described a strange atmosphere in that last hour before the attack; an underlying gloominess as if the family had already lost loved ones. "We were excited about the baby, but everyone was feeling a bit off, there was a heavy atmosphere."

In the courtyard, we looked at the photos on the phone of baby Waad all dressed up in her new clothes, and of her two dead brothers, Hussein and Hassan, both grinning warmly. "We were all talking about the old days, how easily we used to go down to the south to visit them in Harouf," said Hala. "Selwa was always talking about how much she wanted to go back to her village. Neither of them liked Beirut much."

Twenty minutes after Selwa and her family returned to the flat they were staying in, the other Wehbes heard the blast. It shook the walls and furniture in their home. Abbas described standing in shock, staring at the demolished building. "I couldn't make sense of what had happened, I just stood there watching the smoke and fire. Only when I came back here and turned on the television did I know what had happened. We waited till dawn then went back to the site to search with the rescue workers.

"The first thing I saw was her hand and the ring Ali gave her. I recognised the children from the clothes they were wearing - they had been at the house only a few minutes earlier."

At this point Amal quietly lowered her head into her hand and held it there.

"The rescue workers were trying to take the baby from her arms but they couldn't - it was as if they didn't want to be separated," said Abbas. "It was the same with the two boys. Hassan was gripping on to her arm, and little Hussein clutching on to her thigh. The

rescue workers couldn't pull them away from their mother".